

## Analysis of Print Media Coverage of Intrafamilial Homicide Cases in Québec From 2007 to 2012

### SYNTHESIS

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This synthesis presents the results of a descriptive, exploratory analysis of media coverage of cases of intrafamilial homicide. It is part of a larger study aimed at exploring the consequences of such coverage. The study was conducted in response to a mandate entrusted to Suzanne Léveillé, Michel Tousignant, Julie Laforest and Pierre Maurice by the Quebec Press Council. The full report is available online on the Québec Press Council's website.

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Intrafamilial homicides account for about one third of all homicides committed in Québec. The most common category of intrafamilial homicide is spousal homicide, with some 15 cases per year. Filicide, or the murder of a child by a parent, claims six to eight victims annually. Lastly, every year there is approximately one familicide, involving the homicide of children and the other parent, with or without the suicide of the perpetrator.<sup>1</sup>

The killing of children by their parents (filicide and familicide) is a form of intrafamilial homicide that attracts considerable attention in the media, particularly because of its unusual and sensational nature. Certain cases that have been in the news in Québec in recent years have drawn particularly intense media coverage.

Media coverage of interpersonal violence, including intrafamilial homicides, can affect public beliefs and perceptions about the acceptability of violent behaviour in couple relationships and families.<sup>2</sup> The media can also spread a distorted picture of this phenomenon that does not reflect the reality of the social problems concerned. For example, media coverage of child maltreatment tends to focus on the most serious cases, even though such cases are not very common.<sup>3</sup> Media interest in the most serious cases is also observed in the coverage of sexual assault and violence in general.<sup>4</sup>

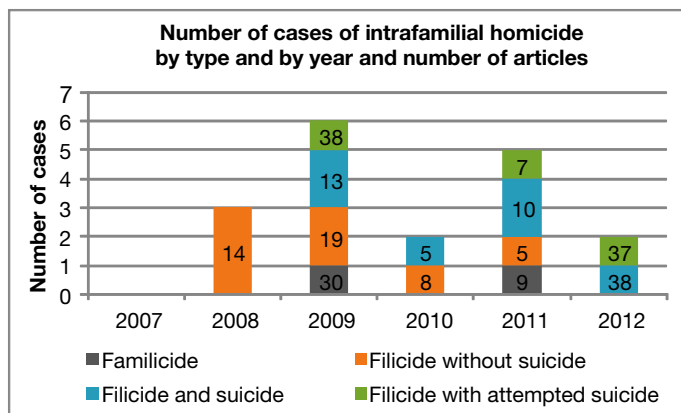
To date, no studies have been conducted in Québec on the way in which journalists portray intrafamilial homicides other than spousal homicides. The goal of this synthesis is to assess the media coverage of filicide and familicide cases in Québec between 2007 and 2012 and its potential impact on the perception of this problem among the general public.

## Description of media coverage

This description of media coverage of intrafamilial homicide<sup>\*</sup> is based on an analysis of the content of print media concerning all cases of this type of homicide that occurred in Québec between 2007 and 2012 and were the subject of an article in a daily newspaper.

The following chart shows the distribution of 18 cases of intrafamilial homicide by type for each year in the study period, as well as the number of articles on each type.

### Number of cases of intrafamilial homicide by type and by year and number of articles



Note: Each case of intrafamilial homicide corresponds to an event that occurred within a family, regardless of the number of victims.

This chart shows that 2009 was the year with the most intrafamilial homicides, followed by 2011. As for the coverage of these cases in the media, 2009 and 2012 were the years with the most media coverage on average for each case, i.e., 16.7 and 37.5 articles respectively per case.

When the type of homicide is taken into account, filicide followed by attempted suicide was the type of intrafamilial homicide that generated the most articles, i.e., 82 articles for 3 cases. Filicide followed by suicide ranked second, with 66 articles for 6 cases, while filicide without suicide ranked third, with 46 articles for 7 cases. Lastly, two cases of familicide were the subject of 39 articles.

## Methodology

### Selection of articles

The newspaper articles were selected using a list of filicides and homicides committed in Québec between 2007 and 2012. The information analyzed covered a two-week period following the commission or the discovery of each homicide. The sources included *Le Soleil*, *La Presse*, *La Tribune*, *Le Droit*, *La Voix de l'Est*, *Le Nouvelliste*, *Le Devoir*, *Le Journal de Québec*, *Le Journal de Montréal* and *The Gazette*. Opinion pieces, columns, editorials and duplicate articles were excluded.

### Coding and analysis of articles

A coding framework was developed for the articles on the basis of the literature on intrafamilial homicides and media coverage of cases of violence. QSR NVivo 10 software was used to facilitate and systematize the analysis of the articles' content. The initial analysis focused on the title of each article, the language used to describe the homicidal act, the mention of the means employed, the assignment of motives for the homicide, the mention of a message or a letter by the perpetrator or his or her spouse, reference to a previous case, the informants consulted, reference to the media, and the mention of support resources and prevention strategies. This synthesis discusses certain characteristics of the media coverage and of the cases that received the most attention (number of victims, atypical profile or gender of the perpetrator, unusual elements).

### Limitations

This synthesis presents the results of a descriptive, exploratory study. The study's findings do not allow conclusions to be drawn about the impact (causation and replication) of media coverage on the incidence of intrafamilial homicides. For methodological reasons, the content analysis focused exclusively on print media articles published in traditional media.

The period chosen for the selection of the articles constitutes another limitation in that it did not include other periods of intense media coverage (e.g., trials) that were likely to have an impact on vulnerable people and consequences for the victims' families. However, the period chosen provided a better understanding of media coverage at the most important time, i.e., when the event was revealed to the public. This is one of the moments when events of this type receive the most public attention, especially if no trial is planned because the perpetrator of the homicide is dead. In fact, this was the case in more than one third of the homicides analyzed.

\* Since the analysis of media coverage deals exclusively with cases of filicide and familicide, the term intrafamilial homicide refers to filicide or familicide unless indicated otherwise.

## Main findings

**+** The analysis focused on a total of 233 articles on 18 cases of filicide or familicide between 2007 and 2012. Eighty percent of the articles (187) had been published in French-language newspapers, while the remainder (46 articles) had been published in English in *The Gazette*.

To illustrate the main findings of the content analysis, this section quotes certain passages from the articles. However, since the goal is to provide an overall picture of the coverage of intrafamilial homicides in the print media, neither the authors of the quotations nor the newspapers in which they were published have been identified.

Generally speaking, the media coverage of intrafamilial homicide was fairly uniform from one article to the next and remained consistent over time. The analysis revealed certain characteristics.

### Detailed information published “on the spot”

The information contained in the newspaper articles on intrafamilial homicides was often very detailed. Moreover, it was published soon after the discovery of the homicide. Slightly over 60% (142) of the articles analyzed were published within five days following the discovery of the homicide.

The circumstances were usually described in detail (discovery, place, means used, information on the perpetrators and victims), and the information published did not always come from official sources. This is due, among other things, to the fact that the information was published soon after the discovery of the homicide, and the family, loved ones or acquaintances were sometimes more readily accessible for a short period of time.

The means used to commit the homicide, suicide or attempted suicide were known and published very rapidly in the vast majority of cases (12 out of 18). Indeed, they were mentioned in 95 of the 233 articles analyzed. Preliminary explanations were also discussed by reporting certain aspects of the police investigation or

excerpts from the reactions of family, loved ones or members of the community.

The articles published later on (91) focused in particular on the funeral, the reactions of the community, the progress of the investigation or the appearance and arraignment of the alleged perpetrator.

### Emphasis on the dramatic and sensational aspects of the homicide

The titles of the articles were sometimes very explicit and emphasized the dramatic or spectacular aspects of the homicide.

*“Newborn baby found in garbage bin: the mother is accused of murder”*

Generally speaking, the titles provided information on the homicidal act by describing the circumstances, the developments in the investigation, the arrest of the perpetrator, his or her state of health and the organization of the victims’ funeral.

*“Terribly sad funeral for Sabrina and Amanda, without their parents”*

The term “tragedy” or “family tragedy” was used in nearly 30% of the titles of the articles analyzed. As for the language used in the body of the articles’ text, it contained the term “tragedy” at least once in over 50% of cases.

*“FAMILY TRAGEDY IN LONGUEUIL  
A final tribute to the two victims”*

The terms “murder” and “homicide”, which highlight the fatal and criminal nature of the acts committed, were used less frequently, i.e., in 16% of the articles.

### An incursion into the privacy of the families affected

Due to the very nature of intrafamilial homicides, the media are required to look closely at the private lives of the families and loved ones affected by these tragic

events. They are expected in particular to explain the motives for the homicide.

In the articles analyzed, the perpetrator's family and loved ones generally talked about the motives by reporting information confided in them, expressed their shock and sadness, or took the defence of the perpetrator by speaking highly of his or her qualities as a parent. In some cases, they also talked about the qualities of the victims.

*“. . . was described yesterday as a pleasant and friendly man with no criminal record. ‘He was always very polite and pleasant,’ said . . . yesterday while pointing to the door of his next-door neighbour’s apartment.”*

### Attempts to explain the inexplicable

The death of a child at the hands of a parent is unusual and difficult to explain. Some of the articles analyzed discussed this fact and mentioned the lack of warning signs.

*“A convenience store clerk who often ran into the mother and her daughter said that there was nothing to suggest that a tragedy of this sort would occur.”*

Despite the inexplicable nature of the murders committed, the media strive to find explanations from the family, loved ones, community members and experts. The most common motives mentioned in the articles analyzed were personal problems, mental health problems, a history of violence, the separation of a couple and disputes over child custody. These motives correspond to those that have been identified on the basis of scientific research on this subject.<sup>1</sup>

The most commonly reported personal problems were financial difficulties or tragic events experienced by the perpetrator of the homicide. They were presented as a possible explanation for the perpetrator's depressed state.

*“over the past few days, people who were in contact with them said that . . . and his wife . . . were between jobs and had financial problems. Even though professional or financial stress cannot alone explain why someone commits suicide, it is a major source of psychological distress according to the experts we interviewed.”*

The main mental problems reported in the articles to be a cause of homicide were depression and a history of suicidal behaviour, a loss of contact with reality or inner distress. Although psychologists and psychiatrists may have been the sources of this information, loved ones and even members of the community who were quite removed from the perpetrators or the victims (neighbours, strangers) also mentioned these reasons.

*“Apparently, the mother of the family was depressed at the time of the family tragedy, the second one in Laval within the space of a week”*

The motives for homicide were sometimes considered within the broader perspective of family or spousal violence, primarily psychological violence against a spouse or a former spouse. Indeed, in 8 of the 18 cases studied, a history of violence was mentioned by friends, family or neighbours.

*“Neighbours and friends said that the father had been violent in the past.”*

The separation of a couple was discussed as a motive in 7 of the 18 cases. In fact, separation was commonly provided as an explanation for “family tragedies,” even when it had occurred several years earlier.

*“Accused of murder, he apparently did not accept his spouse’s decision to break up with him.”*

Disputes over child custody were also presented in the media coverage (8 cases out of 18) as being a key factor in filicide. For that purpose, journalists used specific information obtained from the family and the circle of social and other contacts (friends, co-workers) of the victims or the perpetrator, or from their neighbours.

*“A marital breakup ended horribly in Longueuil, yesterday. A mother and her 13-year-old daughter were savagely assassinated during a dispute over child custody and the family home. The woman’s spouse, who was the father of the couple’s two other children, was arrested as the primary suspect.”*

The motives mentioned in the case of homicides involving babies who were maltreated were usually related to the infants’ crying. In addition, tense relations between a parent and an adolescent regarding religious or cultural practices were offered as an explanation in the case of an adolescent beaten to death by her father.

### Characteristics of cases with the most media coverage

An average of three cases of filicide and familicide were covered in the media per year during the study period. Even though such events are rare, their highly tragic nature and the fact that they involve the death of children

mean that they attract a great deal of media interest. However, not all intrafamilial homicides receive the same media attention.

Between 2007 and 2012, five cases received more media coverage and four of them were the subject of over 30 articles during a two-week period. These five cases accounted for slightly over two thirds of the newspaper articles analyzed (160 out of 233). Three of the cases occurred in 2009 and two in 2012.

### Circumstances surrounding the homicides

As shown in the table below, the circumstances surrounding the homicides included an unusual element in several cases: a suicide pact between the two parents, messages announcing the homicide on a social network site the day it occurred, the context in which the homicide took place (during a custody visit that should have been supervised), the method used to commit the homicide (drowning in a bathtub) and the fact that the family concerned had ties with organized crime.

### Characteristics of the cases of intrafamilial homicide with the most media coverage between 2007 and 2012

Cases with coverage of more than 15 articles			Characteristics of the cases				
No. of articles	Type of homicide	Year	No. of child victims	Ages of victims	Profile of perpetrator	Circumstances	Motives assigned
38	Filicide with attempted suicide	2009	2	5 years 3 years	Male, physician	Attempted suicide with unusual means	Recent separation, disputes over child custody
38	Filicide with suicide	2012	2	13 years 11 years	Male	Messages announcing the act on social media	Disputes over child custody
37	Filicide with attempted suicide	2012	3	5 years 4 years 2 years	Female	Homicides committed during a visit that should have been supervised; drowning	Disputes over child custody
30	Familicide with attempted suicide	2009	3	12 years 7 years 4 years	Female	Suicide pact between the two parents	Financial problems
17	Filicide without suicide	2009	2	9 years 8 years	Female, ties with organized crime	Cause of death not apparent	Financial problems

### Atypical profile of the perpetrator of a homicide

Media interest is greater when the homicidal parent has an atypical profile; for example, the parent practices a prestigious profession or the perpetrator is a woman. In three of the five above-mentioned cases that received the most media coverage, the mother was the perpetrator of the homicide. However, in 60% of the cases analyzed in this synthesis, it was the father who was the perpetrator (11 cases out of 18); in one third of the cases, it was the mother (6 cases out of 18); and in only one case, the homicide was committed by both parents.

As shown by a study conducted on this question in the United Kingdom, cases where the profile of the homicidal parent is atypical are covered to a greater extent in the media because they are perceived as being so inconceivable. The same is true of cases where it appears, after the fact, that health or social services could have taken steps to prevent the homicide.<sup>5</sup>

### Temporal proximity with other cases

The temporal proximity of a homicide with other cases can also result in more media attention. For example, one familicide and three filicides were committed in short succession between January and April 2009, with the result that intrafamilial homicides were discussed in the print media on an almost continuous basis.

Media coverage is not only dependent on the specific characteristics of each case. Indeed, the commission of a new intrafamilial homicide can rekindle interest in other cases of this type that were previously the object of intense media coverage. Parallels are sometimes drawn between two high-profile cases, generating a new wave of media interest in an earlier case.

### Number of child victims

In the cases analyzed, the number of child victims of a homicide was a good indicator of whether or not a case would attract more media coverage in terms of the number of articles published and the duration of the coverage. The five cases of intrafamilial homicide that received the most media attention involved at least two child victims. Only two of the 13 other cases identified involved two child victims, while the other cases involved only one such victim. When several children were killed during an intrafamilial homicide, the media coverage

usually continued for five days after the commission of the homicide. This finding is consistent with the results of a study on the coverage of homicides in the British press, which revealed that the scope of the coverage of homicides increases with the number of victims involved.<sup>6</sup>

## Discussion

The way in which the media portray spousal violence and intrafamilial homicide, regardless of whether the focus is on reported incidents or the problem in general, can have an impact on the public's perception of the problem. For example, media coverage of intrafamilial homicides highlights the sudden and inexplicable nature of such acts, leading to the belief that they are almost impossible to prevent. However, an analysis of records from the coroner's office revealed that in most of the cases covered by this analysis, the act in question had been preceded by weeks, months or even years of conflict.<sup>7</sup>

Some thought should be given to how certain characteristics of coverage in the print media can affect the people concerned. For example, although the articles analyzed generally showed consideration for the bereaved, the desire to assign a motive or to explain an intrafamilial homicide led to an incursion into the privacy of the victims and their families. However, revealing intimate details about a person's family or married life does not always lead to a better understanding of a homicide. The articles analyzed also devoted considerable attention to the revelations and reactions of neighbours, members of the community and even strangers, thus often providing little in the way of verified factual information about the cases they discussed.

In addition, several of the actors concerned by media coverage of intrafamilial homicides stressed the importance of achieving a balance in the way the facts are reported.<sup>8</sup> For instance, they said that coverage should not focus exclusively on positive comments made about the homicidal parent, but should instead put these remarks into their proper perspective by highlighting the criminal nature of the act committed and taking care not to glorify the perpetrator of the homicide. As in the case of suicide, there is good reason to ask whether it is necessary to provide a detailed, vivid and explicit description of the method used to commit a homicide or

suicide. There is also a need to reflect on the impact such descriptions can have on the loved ones of the victims or the perpetrator.

In general, media coverage of filicides and familicides committed in Québec gives an overall impression that there is not simply one motive for these homicides. That being said, when the articles were considered individually, it was noted that they sometimes simplified the “reason” why the perpetrator committed the filicide or presented the homicide as a way out of the perpetrator’s problems.

A recent separation and disputes over child custody are often presented in the media as a “classic scenario” for explaining intrafamilial homicide when, in reality, they are simply some of the factors that can be associated with these events. Other factors include, in particular, spousal violence, child maltreatment, and severe distress or depression on the part of the perpetrator.<sup>1</sup>

Intrafamilial homicides are rarely discussed within the broader context in which they occur. Describing intrafamilial homicide as the outcome of a difficult separation or the way out of disputes over child custody for parents who love their children does not help to denormalize such acts. Every year, thousands of families find themselves in similar situations without resorting to homicide. Repeating this reality more often and focusing the discussion on the consequences of homicide on families and society as a whole, not to mention available support resources, would help to provide the public with less anecdotal information and to stress the uncommon or unusual nature of intrafamilial homicides.

Lastly, even though few studies have focused to date on how media coverage of intrafamilial homicides may encourage people to commit such acts, the precautionary principle suggests that care must be taken. This becomes particularly obvious when work on media coverage of suicide is taken into account. Such work has shown that the way in which suicides are reported in the media can play a role in cases of suicide “by imitation” and that it is possible to raise media awareness about this issue and thus encourage the adoption of good practices.<sup>7,9</sup> Therefore, it is important to continue reflecting on the way in which intrafamilial homicides are reported and portrayed in the media, as well as on the impact such media coverage can have on

the victims’ loved ones, the community and society in general.

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# Analysis of Print Media Coverage of Intrafamilial Homicide Cases in Québec From 2007 to 2012

## AUTHORS

Julie Laforest, Scientific Advisor  
Dominique Gagné, Scientific Advisor  
Pierre Maurice, Head of the Scientific Unit  
Direction du développement des individus et des communautés

## TRANSLATION

Alison McGain

## LINGUISTIC REVISION

Michael Keeling

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